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# Nico Assumpção and jazz bass improvisation

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

NICO ASSUMPÇÃO AND JAZZ BASS IMPROVISATION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

by


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
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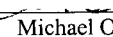
To: Dean R. Bruce Dunlap  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Waldir de Amorim Pinto, and entitled Nico Assumpção and Jazz Bass Improvisation, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.


  
Joseph Rohm

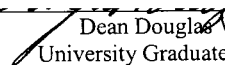
  
Sam Lussier

  
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The thesis of Waldir de Amorim Pinto is approved.

  
Dean R. Bruce Dunlap  
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Florida International University, 2004

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### NICO ASSUMPÇÃO AND JAZZ BASS IMPROVISATION

by

Waldir de Amorim Pinto

Florida International University, 2004

Miami, Florida

Professor Mike Orta, Major Professor

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate Nico Assumpção. He has not received the interest and recognition of the American jazz audience, despite having recorded and performed with some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world.

Four works were transcribed and analyzed in detail with respect to the following issues and elements: rhythmic conception, bass techniques and melodic and harmonic characteristics. Observations were made and trends examined in his music as well as his improvisational style, which illustrates his stylistic significance.

Results show that Nico Assumpção is indeed representative of the Jazz Fusion and Latin Jazz styles, despite his low profile in jazz literature. This is seen in his electric bass playing through his use of Brazilian and other Latin elements in conjunction with a jazz vocabulary. This is exemplified through the transcriptions and analysis of his works.

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## Chapter One

### I. Introduction

#### 1.1 - Brief biography of Nico Assumpção

Born Antônio Álvaro Assumpção Neto in São Paulo, Brazil in 1954, Assumpção started to play the electric bass when he was 16 years old. In 1976 he moved to New York City in order to further his studies. In New York City he played with important jazz musicians such as: Larry Willis, John Hicks, Steve Slagle and Victor Lewis, to name a few.

In Brazil in 1981, Assumpção recorded that country's first bass solo record. Living in Rio de Janeiro since 1982 he became one of the most in demand Brazilian musicians either in recording studios or in live performances, until his death in 2001.

Besides playing and recording with the most important Brazilian artists he also recorded and played with some of the greatest jazz artists such as: Billy Cobham, Larry Coryell, Pat Metheny, Ernie Watts, Joe Henderson, Phil Woods, Joe Diorio, Eliane Elias, Ronnie Foster, Frank Gambale, Lee Konitz, Airtó Moreira, among others. His first book, *Bass Solo: segredos da improvisação* (Assumpção, 2000) was released one year before his death.

During his career Assumpção always earned the best praises regarding his technique, melodic improvisations, and articulations either in Brazil or abroad.

## 1.2 - Overview of thesis

In order to avoid redundancy and repetition, different solos of Assumpção's have been used to illustrate different techniques that are identified with Assumpção's style.

Instead of separating chapters by compositions the purpose of this research is to dedicate each chapter to one aspect of his improvising technique. The tunes analyzed present different rhythms and tempo in order to increase the range of the research, from the fast blues "Blues for Mr. Saltzman" (Brasil, 1970, track 6) to the slow tempo bolero "Jade" (Bosco, 1990, track 4), the jazz samba "Serra do Mar" (Biglione, 1989, track 7) and the baião "Eu sei que vou te amar" (Jobim, 1959, track 1).

Thus chapter two will examine the rhythmic basis of his solos. Assumpção's different solos will be analyzed in order to find either the Jazz swing feel among his phrasing or the straight eighth and sixteenth notes. Also the rhythmic patterns and syncopation will be verified.

Chapter three will focus on Assumpção's instrumental techniques like: articulations, "pizzicato", "double-stops", among others, and the examples will be identified.

Chapter four will examine the harmonic and melodic characteristics of Assumpção's solos. Scale choices, passing tones, motifs, quotation, and other techniques identified with the jazz idiom will be discussed.

The transcriptions of Assumpção's solos can be found as follows: "Serra do Mar" (Biglione, 1989, track 7), appendix 1; "Eu sei que vou te amar" (Jobim,

1959, track 1), appendix 2; "Jade" (Bosco, 1990, track 4), appendix 3; "Blues for Mr. Saltzman" (Brasil, track 6), appendix 4.



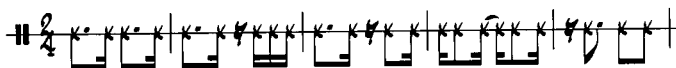
II – Rhythmic Analysis

Gridley (2003) states the following:

“The most common definition for jazz requires that a performance contain improvisation and convey jazz swing feeling.” (p.6)

Based on this sentence this chapter will focus on the rhythmic feeling and characteristics of Assumpção’s improvisations. First, some considerations must be made in order to provide elements for this analysis. Assumpção’s transcribed solos (see Appendices) show how he mixed Brazilian and straight rhythmic elements with jazz swing feel, depending on the tune.

Giffoni (1997) mentions Brazilian music as very rich in syncopations and describes some of the most common Brazilian rhythmic figures. There is a selected Brazilian rhythmic example very common in Assumpção’s bass lines. This is as follows:



This rhythm denotes a straight sixteenth note feel and may be combined with a variety of syncopation giving the music a type of swing which differs from the jazz swing feel in its basis. Bredice (1981) defines syncopation:

" Broadly speaking by syncopation we mean a displacement of natural accents...when we play a note on a weaker beat and hold that sound through a

stronger beat...any down beat is stronger than any up beat." (p.56)

The jazz swing feel basic figure derives from the tied-triplet figure described by Gridley (2003) as:

"...the swing eighth-note pattern, falls somewhere between the tied-triplet figure and a sequence of eighth notes having identical durations." (p.369)

Thus, the basic swing eighth note can be represented as:



This figure is equivalent to



Assumpção uses either straight or swing figures and combines them with a variety of syncopations that creates the rhythmic colors of his improvisations. The following examples demonstrate this:

Measures 1, 2, 3 and 4 ("Serra do Mar" - Appendix 1)

These measures demonstrate Assumpção's use of peculiar Brazilian rhythmic figures. Syncopation can be identified among the four measures as well as a mixture of straight eighth and sixteenth notes.





Measures 23 and 24 ("Blues for Mr. Saltzman - appendix 4)

Syncopation can also be found in this example on a swinging blues, but instead of straight eighth notes Assumpção uses swing eighth notes.



Measures 20 to 24 ("Serra do Mar" - appendix 1)

An example of a long passage using straight sixteenth notes.

Musical notation for measures 20 to 24 of "Serra do Mar". The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation shows a long passage of straight sixteenth notes. Above the first staff, the chord symbol  $F\#7\text{b}9\text{b}5$  is written. Below the second staff, the chord symbol  $C\text{M}7(\#11)$  is written. The notation is dense with many sixteenth notes.

Measures 9 and 10 ("Serra do Mar" - appendix 1)

Here is another example of Assumpção's use of classical style sixteenth notes.

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff shows measures 9 and 10 with chords E and EM7. The second staff shows measures 11 and 12 with chords E6 and EM7. The music features sixteenth-note patterns.

Measures 5 and 6 ("Jade" - appendix 3)

Here is an example of eighth note triplets use.

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff shows measures 5 and 6 with chords CMIN7 and CMIN/Bb. The second staff shows measures 7 and 8 with chords CMIN7 and CMIN/Bb. The music features eighth-note triplets.

Measures 7 and 8 ("Blues for Mr. Saltzman" - appendix 4)

Assumpção's use of quarter note triplets.

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff shows measures 7 and 8 with chords A MIN7 and Ab MIN7. The second staff shows measures 9 and 10 with chord Db7(9). The music features quarter-note triplets.

Measure 11 ("Eu sei que vou te amar" - appendix 2)

Here Assumpção uses an arpeggio over a sixteenth-note triplet.



### III – Assumpção's Electric Bass Techniques

This chapter will show some of the bass techniques favored by Nico Assumpção. Since the primary focus of this research is Assumpção's transcribed solos, some of his techniques will not have a detailed analysis, but they are mentioned for clarity and cohesiveness.

Assumpção had command of a variety of modern electric bass techniques, in addition to his perfect and precise *pizzicato*. Through his recordings techniques like *slap*, *tapping*, *two-hands tapping*, could be heard.

Kernfeld (1988) describes *slap* as “An effect produced on the double bass by means of an exaggerated *pizzicato* technique: the string is drawn away from, or across, the fingerboard at high tension and then released suddenly so that the resulting note is accompanied by a percussive click or slapping sound as the string hits the fingerboard.” (p.465)

*Tapping* is also a percussive form to play the bass, however without drawing the string away from the fingerboard. Instead the fingers tap the strings and can even play chords, when strings are tapped at the same time.

When a bass player combines two hands playing with the *tapping* technique he can reach a sort of independent playing called *two-hands tapping* technique. This gives the bassist the ability to accompany himself in many ways, like a pianist.

Nico Assumpção could perform the above describe techniques with perfection. This could be seen throughout his career and even among the repertoire included in this research, although mainly as an accompaniment device.

One technique widely utilized by jazz bass players is the *ghost note*. It is a percussive effect that bassists create by plucking the strings with the right hand while touching smoothly the string over the neck of the instrument. It is often used on the upbeat of Jazz or Samba to provide a sort of rhythmic feel.

Nico Assumpção takes advantage of this technique as shown by the following examples:

Measure 53 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” – appendix 4)



Measure 12 (“Serra do mar” – appendix 1)



Assumpção also uses traditional articulations such as *appoggiatura*.

Measure 6 (“Jade” – appendix 3)

On down beat one Assumpção applies the *appoggiatura* over a half note.



Measure 17 (“Serra do Mar” – appendix 1)

This example shows Assumpção using one *appoggiatura* for each beat of the measure.



According to Oppenheim (1981, p.6):

“A hammered-on note is any note that is played with the left hand, without any articulation from the right hand. Notice that a hammered-on note can be any kind of note on any string, and that when a hammered-on note is preceded by a note articulated by the right hand, those notes are connected with a slur”.

Through the analyses of Assumpção’s solos a wide-ranging use of this technique can be found.



### Measure 5 ("Blues for Mr. Saltzman" – Appendix 4)

This is an example of how Assumpção uses a hammered-on note on the second beat of the measure.



### Measure 7 ("Jade" – appendix 3)

A variation of the hammered-on note is the lifted-off note. The difference between these is that while the first moves towards a higher tone the second makes the contrary movement towards a lower tone. This is demonstrated in the following example;



### Measure 21 ("Serra do mar" – appendix 1)

In this measure Assumpção uses both hammered-on and lifted-off notes.



Measure 12 (“Eu sei que vou te amar” – appendix 2)

Another device utilized by electric bass players is the *double-stop*. This consists of plucking two strings in the same moment in order to play a chord.

Intervals may vary. The more common are: thirds, fifths, tri-tone, sevenths and octave.

On this measure Assumpção demonstrates the use of an octave double-stop.



## Chapter Four

### IV – Harmonic and Melodic Considerations

This chapter will focus on the jazz idiom harmonic and melodic features of Assumpção's transcribed solos. Assumpção's favorite scales, arpeggios, patterns, motifs and other devices will be shown as well.

One common craft among jazz musicians is the quotation. It consists of playing a fragment of another tune (usually a well known tune) within an improvised solo.

Measures 62 and 63 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” – appendix 4)

Assumpção quotes “The boogie-woogie bugle boy” (Prince, 1941).



Another device used by Jazz musicians is the motif. Motif is a small fragment of a melodic line that is repeated sequentially even without a harmonic parallel with the tune.

Measures 82, 83 and 84 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” – appendix 4)



Measure 17 (“Serra do mar” – appendix 1)

This measure is an example of the use of the pentatonic scale. Assumpção plays a Major pentatonic (2<sup>nd</sup> mode of F# Major) over an F#7sus chord.



Another technique used by jazz soloists is the upper/lower neighbor note approach. It targets a chord tone (usually on a down beat) by playing one note above and one below the chord tone. These approach notes can be half-step or whole-step from the chord tone. It can be seen through Assumpção’s transcribed solos that this is one of his favorite devices.

Measure 15 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” – appendix 4)

This measure demonstrates Assumpção targeting G on beat three (9<sup>th</sup> of F7) following A and F#.



Measure 21 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” appendix4)

In this example, Assumpção targets Bb on beat three (3<sup>rd</sup> of Gm7), following C and A.



Levine (1995) states: “The Bebop scales are traditional scales [the Ionian, Dorian, and Mixolydian modes of the Major scale, and the Melodic Minor scale] with an added chromatic passing tone.” (p.171)

Measure 47 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman” – appendix 4)

This is an example of Assumpção use of an F Bebop dominant scale, which has the chromatic tone between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the root.



Measure 9 (“Serra do mar” – appendix 1)

In this measure Assumpção uses two passing tones on upbeats targeting B (5<sup>th</sup> of E) and G# (3<sup>rd</sup> of E6 on first beat of measure 10).



Measures 11 and 12 (“Blues for Mr. Saltzman – appendix 4)

In these measures Assumpção uses an ascending F Mixolydian and a descending F Lydian dominant scale targeting a dissonant Major 7 on a C7 (9).



## Summary

These transcriptions and analyses demonstrate several significant features of Nico Assumpção's playing and cast him as a representative figure of the Jazz Fusion [a mixture of Jazz with Rock electric instruments] and Latin Jazz [which is the use of Latin and Brazilian elements in Jazz] styles. First, his rhythmic conception denotes a mixture of swing and straight Latin feeling, depending on the characteristics of the tune. Syncopation and rhythmic displacement are other devices he utilizes.

Second, an examination of a variety of Assumpção's bass techniques demonstrates his capacity as a soloist and his wide-ranging command of the instrument and modern techniques common to Rock and Funk styles.

Finally, the harmonic and melodic characteristics of his improvisations shows that he was very comfortable within the jazz vocabulary of scales, patterns and other devices.

From the above detailed analyses and description, it can be seen that Nico Assumpção is an improviser worthy of more detailed study. This type of analysis has not been previously undertaken and will add innovative knowledge to the current literature available. Further research should follow the analytical and transcriptional model set out in this present thesis.

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## SERRA DO MAR

VICTOR BIGNONE

SOLO BASS

E EM7 E6 EM7 G/A

E EM7 C#MIN7 C#MIN7(9)

D7(9#11) E EM7

E6 EM7 G/A

E EM7 C#MIN7 C#MIN7(9) D7(9#11)

F#7sus

C#M7 F#7sus

C M7(#11)



E



## EU SEI QUE VOU TE AMAR

SOLO BASS

$B^b\text{maj}7$        $A/G^\#$        $B^b/G$   
 $D/F^\#$        $E$        $E/D$        $C^\#\text{min}7$   
 $E\text{min}7$        $A7(9)/E$        $D^\#\text{min}9$        $D^\#\text{min}9/G^\#$        $G^\#7(b9)(b9)$   
 $C^\#\text{min}7(9)$        $D\text{maj}7$        $B\text{min}7$        $E7(9)$        $C^\#\text{min}7(9)$        $D\text{maj}7$   
 $B\text{min}7(9)$        $E7(9)$        $C^\#\text{min}7(9)$        $D\text{maj}7$        $B\text{min}7(9)$        $E7(9)$   
 $C^\#\text{min}7$        $D\text{maj}7$

# JADE

JOAO BOSCO

SOLO BASS

C MIN C MIN(MA97) C MIN7 C MIN6 G MIN G MIN(MA97)

G MIN7 G MIN6 C MIN7 C MIN/Bb C MIN7 C MIN/Bb

A MIN9 D7(9)(13)

## BLUES FOR MR. SALTZMAN

SOLO BASS

F7(9) A0M B<sup>b</sup>7 B<sup>b</sup>0M F7/C

C<sup>b</sup>M7 F7(1b9) B<sup>b</sup>7 B0M

A<sup>b</sup>M7 A<sup>b</sup>M7 D<sup>b</sup>7(9) G<sup>b</sup>M7

G<sup>b</sup>M7 C7(b9) F7 D7(9) G7 C7(9)

END CHORUS

82



Musical staff 82: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (B-flat), 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth and quarter notes, ending with a whole rest.

3RD CHORUS

85



Musical staff 85: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated above the notes.

88



Musical staff 88: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated below the notes.

91



Musical staff 91: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes, ending with a sixteenth-note triplet.

94



Musical staff 94: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated above the notes.

4TH CHORUS

97



Musical staff 97: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes.

40



Musical staff 40: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated below the notes.

43



Musical staff 43: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated below the notes.

46

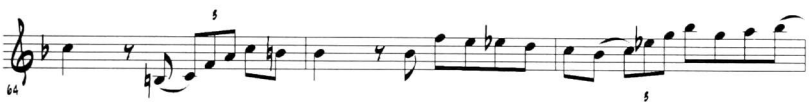


Musical staff 46: Treble clef, key signature of one flat, 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with a five-finger fingering (5) indicated above the notes.

## 5TH CHORUS



## 6TH CHORUS



## 7TH CHORUS



76

79

82

85 8TH CHORUS

88

91

94

97